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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [PHUM](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: KUWAITI VOTING RIGHTS WEEK IN REVIEW: FATWA
REAFFIRMS AMIR'S JURISDICTION, WOMEN LAUNCH GRASSROOTS
PETITION

REF: A. KUWAIT 1091

[B](#). KUWAIT 944

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. Summary: As the parliamentary review of the draft legislation granting women political rights moves slowly forward, Islamist MPs are making their supporting and opposing views known. The Ambassador continues to hear from his contacts that the GOK will succeed in efforts to grant women suffrage. As expected, the fatwa committee reaffirmed the Amir's rule over voting issues despite opposition from some religious scholars. In addition, women have begun to drum up grassroots support from citizens to convince undecided MPs to vote in favor of extending voting rights. Meanwhile, a new poll will measure the amount of support among Kuwaiti women, many of whom remain against or indifferent to becoming a voting constituency.

Parliamentary Update

[2](#)2. (U) The National Assembly Interior and Defense Committee studying the GOK's draft legislation granting women's suffrage will reconvene March 26 to discuss the matter as a precursor to a full parliamentary vote. State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Mohammed Sharar announced that he would represent the GOK in the meeting. Committee Chairman MP Rashed Al-Hubaidah stated that the committee would discuss the bill along with proposals to extend voting to men in the security services and those between 18 and 21. Newspapers report that 13 MPs publicly support women's voting rights while another 15 are officially undecided.

Islamists on Both Sides of Women's Voting Rights Issue

[3](#)3. (U) Poloff and FSN Political Assistant attended a student-sponsored seminar at Kuwait University March 20 during which independent Islamist MP Faisal Al-Mussallam, who opposes women's suffrage, questioned the timing of the voting rights issue at a time when the legislative agenda is already full. In his characteristically animated tone, Al-Mussallam accused the GOK of trying to appease the U.S. before "Bush's shoe reaches us (the Kuwaitis)." He also claimed that the U.S. is frustrated that more Kuwaiti women are not enthusiastically supporting voting rights. According to Al-Mussallam, 34 MPs oppose women's voting, enough to defeat the measure. Another Islamist participant, Mohammed Alajami, a representative of the Nation's Party (Hizb al-Ummah) which defends women's rights, said, "Nothing will change if women vote except the number of voters."

[4](#)4. (U) MP Fahad Al-Khanna, leader of the Parliament's Islamic Bloc and vehement opponent of women's political rights, warned the GOK that continued pressure on MPs to support voting rights could jeopardize future cooperation between his group and the Government. During a Bloc meeting March 21, He criticized the Government's use of state media outlets to campaign for women's rights since official media represents all Kuwaitis, many of whom oppose women's rights.

Insights from Ambassador's Contacts

[5](#)5. (SBU) During a March 22 meeting with the Ambassador, MFA Director of International Organizations Ambassador Abdullah Al-Murad, who just returned from meetings in Italy and Jordan, commented, "Everywhere I go people ask me why Kuwaiti women can't vote." He was somewhat surprised by the international attention the issue has attracted, but like most GOK officials, predicted the bill would pass before the end of April. Likewise, he suggested the U.S. maintain a low-profile on the matter.

[6](#)6. (C) A prominent Kuwaiti businessman told Ambassador that he recommended to the Prime Minister that he fire a cabinet minister and appoint two new ones to ensure that the GOK has enough votes to pass the women's rights legislation. (Note: The Minister of Information position is currently vacant. End note.) The businessman recounted that the PM dismissed his plan outright, assuring him that the Government already has

the votes to succeed. With regard to cabinet shuffle rumors, a former minister and current advisor to the PM, Yousef Al-Ibrahim, told the Ambassador that Finance Minister Mahmud Al-Nuri inevitably will resign for health reasons so there will be some cabinet shift, but he did not predict timing or link to the women's political rights bill.

Fatwa Reflects Societal Split

17. (U) As anticipated (ref A), the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs released a fatwa March 19 which reaffirmed that the Amir is entrusted to rule on the subject of women's political rights. The nine religious scholars who composed the fatwa panel split into three camps, which reflects the complexity of the voting rights issue. The first group believed Kuwaiti women are entitled to full political rights whereas another supported a woman's right to vote, but not seek elected office. The third group opposed women's participation in the political process. The GOK repeatedly has declared its support for nothing short of full political rights for women.

18. (U) Scientific Salafi MP Dr. Waleed Al-Tabtabaie requested that the fatwa panel interpret the five Sharia conditions accompanying the edict. The conditions, derived from Dr. Iqbal Al-Mutawa's book, "Understanding Politics in the Light of Qu'ran and Sunna," stipulate that women participating in Parliament: wear a hijab, may not be in closed meetings only with men, must not travel unless accompanied by a relative, must not allow political responsibilities to prevent them from performing familial duties, and should adhere to Islamic morals.

Women Organize to Garner Grassroots Support

19. (U) National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi urged women to organize their efforts to succeed in gaining political rights. At a March 16 women's gathering at the Assembly, Al-Khorafi criticized the March 7 pro-rights rally (ref B) as poorly coordinated. According to an English-language daily, he regretted ordering the removal of all visitors from the Parliament's public gallery after spectators applauded remarks from MP Mohammed Al-Sager. Al-Khorafi claimed he was only maintaining the dignity of parliamentary procedures.

10. (U) Whether organizers heeded Al-Khorafi's call or recognized the need themselves, pro-rights activists, led by Dr. Rola Dashti of the Kuwait Economic Society, launched a door-to-door campaign March 21 to collect signatures of citizen supporters of women's rights in an attempt to sway the opinion of undecided MPs. The petition declares support for women to vote and run for political office. She told a local newspaper that the women's rights legislation needs two or three more votes to pass.

New Poll to Measure Women's Viewpoint

11. (U) In order to gauge Kuwaiti women's true stance on the voting issue, the Kuwait Journalist Association will conduct a poll March 28 asking Kuwaiti women at least 18 years old whether or not they support full political rights for women. Conventional wisdom indicates a largely unenthusiastic female population either opposes political rights or is apathetically indifferent.

Macabre Example of Gender Equity

12. (U) For the first time, Kuwaiti courts have sentenced a Kuwaiti female to death. Police arrested the woman and four others for drug offenses after a sting operation. The woman pleaded innocent to charges of selling narcotics, including hashish. She and one Egyptian male conspirator were sentenced to death by hanging, the only form of capital punishment in Kuwait.

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